

Strong quake hits remote China townships

AFP, Beijing

A strong earthquake measuring 6.6 on the Richter scale struck north-west China Thursday, but it was in a remote area inhabited by nomads and there were no immediate reports of casualties or damage, local officials told AFP.

"The earthquake, of 6.6 on the Richter scale, hit just before 9am this morning (0100 GMT)," an official surnamed Yan from the State Seismic Bureau, said.

"We don't have much information yet, we don't know about damage or casualties yet."

Officials in Delhi city, in Qinghai province, said the epicenter was about 30 kilometres (18.6 miles) away in two townships -- Hoiit Taria and Da Qaidam.

"I heard that houses have collapsed around the epicenter," said Delhi civil affairs bureau official Gou Tichong, although this could not be confirmed.

SARS virus costing Asia \$ 11 billion

AFP, Hong Kong

The outbreak of the deadly SARS virus has cost Asia nearly 11 billion dollars and the figure could rise, it was reported here Thursday.

A survey conducted by the Far Eastern Economic Review of government statements and reports from financial institutions on the impact so far of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) found that the damages to regional GDP growth for this year totalled around 10.6 billion US dollars.

Others, though, put those losses as high as 15 billion dollars, the Review reported.

One expert, Gurinder Shahi, chief executive officer of the health and biotech consultant BioEnterprise Asia, said SARS could end up costing the region 50 billion dollars, the Reviewsaid.

4 Afghan troops killed in clash

AFP, Kabul

Four Afghan government soldiers were killed in clashes with a group of extremists in the mountains of southern Afghanistan's Zabul province, Interior Minister Ali Ahmad Jalali said Thursday.

"In Zabul province the Afghan security forces were involved in countering a group of terrorists who crossed the border and created chaos in two districts in Shinkay and Shamalzai," near the Pakistani border, Jalali told reporters at a press conference.

Afghan forces surrounded the extremists on Sur Ghar mountain between the provincial capital Qalat and Sharjul, he said, adding that the operation ended Wednesday.



PHOTO: AFP

South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun (L) talks with US Senator Susan Collins (Rep.-ME) (R) during a luncheon meeting at the presidential palace in Seoul on Thursday. A group of US senators is in the country for a meeting with South Korean officials to promote bilateral ties between the two countries, including talks over North Korea's nuclear program.

China under pressure to come clean on SARS

AFP, Hong Kong

China was facing pressure Thursday to reveal the full extent of its SARS epidemic as scientists hailed early progress towards finding a cure for the killer pneumonia.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has asked China to urgently improve the way its reports new cases of atypical pneumonia, or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, after revelations that many cases of the illness were not appearing in official statistics.

The WHO said Wednesday that in Beijing alone the number of cases may be five times higher than reported, indicating China's official toll of 1,457 cases and 65 deaths may be a large underestimation.

China is the region worst affected by the SARS virus, which first emerged in November in the southern province of Guangdong but has spread rapidly around the world in the past two months killing 161 people and infecting over 3,000 people in some 25 countries.

An editorial in the Asian Wall Street Journal said it was vital the Chinese leadership took bold action to confront the scale of the crisis, which is having a devastating economic effect on the whole of Asia.

"Beijing's poor crisis management has not only cost lives and profits, it has shattered faith at home and abroad that a small group of authoritarian but pragmatic leaders could steer the country smoothly along a course of modernization and globalization," said the paper.

But despite the WHO revelations, China's state-controlled media made no mention Thursday of the new Beijing cases and continued with a news blackout about the spread of the virus.

And data provided by China's health ministry to the WHO Thursday revealed just 12 new cases. However it included the first ever case in the remote northern Ningxia Autonomous region indicating the illness is continuing to spread across the vast country.

As the illness claims new victims around the world -- with fresh suspect cases reported in Canada (seven), Malaysia (one) and South Korea (four) -- researchers have warned a cure could be far away despite a breakthrough in identifying the virus.

Researchers from 13 different laboratories around the world pinpointed the coronavirus -- a virus family which causes the common cold -- as the cause of SARS.

The confirmation would allow for the refinement of diagnostic tests and steer a clear path to fight the disease, although a WHO researcher in Geneva said it would take "months to years" to develop a full treatment.

US lowers terror alert

AFP, Washington

The US government on Wednesday lowered the national terrorist attack alert from "high" to "elevated," but cautioned that the country remains, "at risk."

The Department of Homeland Security had raised the alert to the second highest level on March 17, before the start of the Iraq war on March 20, because of fears the war would spark stateside reprisal attacks.

"Following a review of intelligence and an assessment of threats by the intelligence community, the Department of Homeland Security, in consultation with the Homeland Security Council, has made the decision to lower the threat advisory level," said Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge.

"While we continue to be at risk to the threat of terrorism at an elevated level, extensive protective measures remain in place throughout our nation," he said.

"As (Defense) Secretary (Donald) Rumsfeld has noted, hostilities from Operation Iraqi Freedom still continue," said Ridge, using the code name for the war in Iraq.

"There is a lot of work left to do," he said. "We must be vigilant and alert to the possibility that al-Qaeda and those sympathetic to their cause, as well as former Iraqi-regime state agents and affiliated organizations, may attempt to conduct attacks against the US or our interests abroad."

The al-Qaeda network, headed by Saudi national Osama bin Laden, is held responsible for the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington.

Two days before the war in Iraq began on March 20, Washington raised the terror alert level to orange, citing the threat of reprisals by Iraqi agents on US soil.

US intelligence said on March 28 that two plots against US targets in the Middle East by Iraqi intelligence had been uncovered and that others were feared.

And less than two weeks after the war began, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak warned of the "enormous consequences" of the war, saying it could give rise to "a hundred bin Ladens instead of just one."

S Korea, Japan must have role at nuke talks: US

AFP, Seoul

Tight limits imposed by North Korea on nuclear talks emerged as potential obstacles Thursday to a resolution of the six-month-old crisis as key players Japan and South Korea were left without a role.

Senior envoys from China, the United States and North Korea will sit down at the table, bringing negotiators from Washington and its "axis of evil" foe together for the first time since the nuclear showdown erupted in October. A senior US official told AFP that three days of talks would take place between April 23-25.

"We will continue to press for Japanese and South Korea's early inclusion in the talks -- that will be one of our priorities," said State Department deputy spokesman Philip Reeker.

Analysts questioned how much progress could be achieved without South Korea, Japan and others including Russia at the peace table.

"We don't expect immediate breakthroughs, but we're looking for progress," said Reeker.

South Korea warned that it would not be bound by any results from talks at which it took no part as President Roh Moo-Hyun was forced to defend his endorsement of the three-party dialogue.

"What is important is not the format but the results of the talks," Roh told chief advisors, according to presidential officials.

"Many people are unhappy with the fact that South Korea is not part of the talks and think our pride has been hurt," Roh was quoted as saying. "But if we insist on taking part in the talks belatedly, it would only make the matter more complicated."

The format represents a compromise between Pyongyang's demand for one-on-one discussions with Washington, and the US call for a multi-lateral regional solution.

The United States has been pressing China for months to lean on its purported ally North Korea to bring it to the negotiating table over its twin nuclear programs which sparked the showdown.

Pyongyang signalled Saturday it was open to multilateral talks in a move attributed in part by experts to Chinese influence and also a reaction to the US-led military triumph against Iraq.

"We're very pleased with the involvement of the Chinese," said Scott McClellan, a White House spokesman.

"The Chinese agree fully with the United States that the Korean peninsula must be free of nuclear weapons."

Another senior official said that South Korea and Japan had agreed the United States should go ahead without them to inject early momentum into the dialogue.

"They urged us to agree to talks with North Korea to get the process of the talks started," the official said.

Reeker added that the early inclusion of South Korea and Japan "will be essential to reach substantive results that we are seeking."

British troops, cops linked with dirty war against IRA

AFP, London

A branch of British army intelligence and some police officers in Northern Ireland actively helped a Protestant paramilitary group to murder Catholics in the late 1980s, according to a report to be published Thursday.

The claim, widely reported in the British media Thursday, was to be made in a report by the Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir John Stevens, which he was due to make public on Thursday.

The Stevens report, described as the biggest criminal inquiry in British history, into alleged collusion between the security forces and loyalist paramilitaries has also found that military intelligence in Northern Ireland actually prolonged the conflict.

Nigerian polls results investigated

AP, Abuja

Nigeria's independent electoral commission was investigating the results of weekend legislative elections after political parties accused each other of vote rigging.

With more than two-thirds of the returns in by Wednesday, incumbent President Olusegun Obasanjo's ruling party made a solid showing in Saturday's parliamentary vote. Tensions were high days ahead of another election - this time, for president - with the opposition threatening massive protests.

Steve Oseneke, a spokesman for the Independent National Electoral Commission, promised investigations and a report before Saturday's presidential vote.



PHOTO: AFP

French Prime Minister Jean Pierre Raffarin (L) and his Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin sign the entrance agreement for the European Union's 10 new member states during the Informal EU council in Athens on Wednesday. EU leaders signed the entrance agreement for the European Union's 10 new member states, while EU leaders show difficulty to adopt a common position on the war in Iraq.

EU reaffirms backing for ME 'road map'

AFP, Athens

The European Union was Thursday to reaffirm its backing for a "road map" to Middle East peace that envisages a Palestinian state by 2005, according to a draft statement seen by AFP.

"As part of the process of regional security and stability the EU reaffirms its commitment to bring the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to a successful conclusion through the implementation of the steps foreseen in the quartet's road map, keeping within the established time lines," the draft said.

It added that it was "essential that there is an early endorsement by Chairman (Yasser) Arafat and the Palestinian legislative council" of a cabinet led by incoming prime minister Mahmud Abbas, which should be "committed to reform".

The plan, which has drawn serious reservations from Israel, has been drawn up by an international "quartet" comprising the EU, Russia, the United Nations and United States.

Meanwhile, the United States is pressing Israel to withdraw its troops from Palestinian cities and ease restrictions on travel and work to help a new Palestinian administration get on its feet, the New York Times reported Thursday.

The US requests, which also included a speedier turnover of tax revenues to Palestinian authorities, came Tuesday in a White House meeting between US officials and two top aides of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the daily said.

"We've told Israel the kind of steps they need to take to get the peace process going again," an unnamed administration official told the Times.

"The Israelis have gone off to consider what they can do."

Gene found for aging disease in children

AP, Washington

For more than 100 years, scientists have been fascinated and puzzled by a very rare disorder that turns children into old people and causes them to die as teenagers of diseases that usually affect only the elderly.

The disorder, called Hutchinson-Gilford progeria syndrome, strikes only rarely, but its medical course of fast and unrelenting aging is devastating and incurable.

Now, researchers announced at new conference Wednesday, they have found what causes the mysterious disorder - the first step toward a treatment and a boost for learning more about normal aging as well.

A new study has shown that progeria is caused by a single misplaced DNA molecule within the human genome that contains some 3 billion DNA units, said Dr. Francis Collins, head of the National Human Genome Research Institute and the senior author of a report this week in the journal Nature.

Victims of progeria appear normal at birth, but by 18 months begin to develop symptoms of accelerated aging. The skin takes on the appearance of the very old, bones become fragile and most of the children are bald by the age of 4. The children never grow much taller than 3 feet. Their internal organs also quickly age, and death is usually caused by heart disease or stroke at an average age of 13.

Even as teenagers, said Dr. W. Ted Brown, the children with progeria will weigh only 30 to 35 pounds.

Children with the disorder, however, tend to have above-average intelligence, said Brown, a co-author who has studied progeria for 20 years at the New York State Institution for Basic Research in Development Disabilities.

John Tackett, a 15-year-old from Bay City, Mich., who has progeria, said at the news conference that he was just a regular guy who is "very content" even though he knows his disease is fatal.

Tackett, who stands about 3 feet high, is a ninth-grader who is a whiz at math and an expert pool player. He has a job as a cashier at a Bay City restaurant. But angina, a symptom of advancing heart disease usually seen in people in their 60s and 70s, is already causing him to limit some physical activities. A scarf covered his bald head.

Progeria affects only about one baby per 4 million to 8 million worldwide.

The disease was first identified in 1886, but Brown said it has been difficult to study because "there are only a handful or so alive at one time." He said about one patient with progeria is born each year in the United States.

Collins and his co-authors found the mutation on a gene called lamin A in DNA specimens from 18 of 20 progeria patients. A similar study, appearing in the journal Science, found the gene mutation in two progeria patients.

Lamin A, or LMNA, has already been linked to six other diseases. The mutation and the effect is slightly different, on a molecular basis, in each of the diseases.